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Lawmakers Charge Reagan Broke Law On Hill Disclosure

By Edward Walsh
Washington Post Staff Writer

Congressional criticism of President Reagan's decision to sell arms to Iran mounted yesterday as key lawmakers asserted that he violated the law by not informing Congress of the operation and called on him to say that he "made a mistake."

Democrats and Republicans agreed that the covert arms shipments damaged U.S. credibility abroad and the administration's standing at home, but they differed on how severe the damage was to the president personally and what steps Congress should take in response to the episode.

Senate Democratic Whip Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) predicted passage of legislation to tighten the requirements for informing congressional leaders about covert operations, but some lawmakers urged a more cautious approach. Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), who is due to become chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said Reagan should appoint a panel of "wise men and women" to review the workings of the administration's entire foreign policy machinery, which he said "has broken down."

"The president ought to admit that a mistake was made and move on to something else," said Sen. Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.), who was reelected yesterday as the Senate's Republican leader.

Congress' role in the aftermath of the Iran operation is due to move to the forefront today when William J. Casey, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, testifies in closed meetings before the House and Senate intelligence committees.

Dole and Sen. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), reelected yesterday as Democratic leader—making him majority leader of the incoming Democratic-controlled Senate—will also meet with Reagan today while Sens. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.) and Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), the outgoing chairman and vice

chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, are briefed on the Iran operation by Vice Adm. John M. Poindexter, the White House national security adviser.

Reagan met yesterday with House Majority Leader James C. Wright Jr. (D-Tex.) and Minority Leader Robert H. Michel (R-Ill.). Disputing Reagan's claim that no laws were violated by the Iran operation, Wright said the law requiring "timely" reporting of covert activities to Congress "was not followed."

"Anyone who advised him that the law was not being violated misinformed him," added Wright, who is in line to succeed retiring House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.) when the 100th Congress convenes Jan. 6.

Wright also said he was "dismayed" by several of Reagan's statements during his news conference Wednesday night, including his assertion that the arms were not supplied to the regime of Iran's Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

"Well, whose army benefited from them?" Wright asked.

Michel said the law governing reports to Congress is "a gray area," but like most congressional Republicans he made clear his disagreement with Reagan over the wisdom of supplying the arms to Iran. "That is perceived by the public as [arms] being supplied for hostages," he said.

Durenberger said Reagan's interpretation of the law was "grossly erroneous." Asked about Nunn's call for the convening of a panel of outside advisers, Durenberger said several of Reagan's close friends outside government are reviewing the administration's foreign policy troubles and that "out of it may come some personnel changes." He would not elaborate.

While there was widespread agreement on Capitol Hill that the Iran operation was a serious mistake, there was no consensus on how Congress should respond. Cranston suggested legislation that would require reporting covert operations to congressional leaders within about 48 hours of their initiation.

Others called for a review of the National Security Council's role in foreign policy decision-making. Sen. David L. Boren (D-Okla.), who is due to become chairman of the Senate intelligence committee in January, said the committee will likely begin such a review and that he would favor making the NSC head subject to Senate confirmation unless the administration agrees to "back off" and downgrade the council's role.

"They can't have it both ways," Boren said. "If it becomes another agency of government, they have to pay the price, and that means confirmation and oversight."

Sen. John W. Warner (R-Va.) said he was "gravely disturbed by the situation," but added, "I hope Congress proceeds with its job in a dispassionate and objective way. It is not in the national interest to have this issue so heated."

Other Republicans voiced hope that Reagan will ride out the storm without serious damage.

And while Sen. Carl Levin (D-Mich.) accused Reagan of being "in command of neither the facts nor the policy-making process," most Democrats steered clear of personal criticism of Reagan.

"I think the president is still very popular at home, but our credibility abroad has been damaged seriously," Nunn said. "The president should say he made a mistake."